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Interviewer: My name is Alicia Mittelman, I'm a curator at the Estes Park Museum. Today is January 8, 2014, we are at the Estes Park Museum interviewing Bernard Gillett for the Estes Valley Mountaineering Oral History Project a joint venture between the Estes Valley Library and the Estes Park Museum. [This interview is also available in video format, filmed by Brian Brown. The interview was transcribed by Tom Williams with assistance from Alicia Mittelman.]

What is your full name?

Bernard Gillette: Bernard John Gillett.

Interviewer: When and where were you born Bernard?

Bernard Gillette: I was born in Wausau, Wisconsin in 1967, January 30<sup>th</sup>.

Interviewer: When did you begin rock climbing?

Bernard Gillette: I was about ten years old when that started and there was a history that preceded that of course, partly from the family, but also just my childhood. I'll start going all the way back to 1913, two years before Rocky Mountain National Park was created. My grandmother on my father's side and her sister was, Eunice, Aunt Eunice, Great Aunt Eunice and then Leah Sweat was my grandmother. They were members of the Colorado Mountain Club. They climbed Longs Peak, they were living in Denver at the time, they climbed Longs Peak in 1913. So that was some of the earliest ascents of Longs Peak really. Of course it had been climbed 50 years before but I don't think it was a real popular thing to do, certainly not for women at the time. So that began my family's involvement with Rocky Mountain National Park and then my father, his parents took them to Estes Park during the summer time. They'd spend two or three weeks up at the Dings Cabin which is this old cabin right at the foot of Longs Peak off of Highway 7 there. I was driving by it just the other day and it's still there. It still says "Dings" on it. So he spent his summer vacations, short ones, in that cabin and climbed Longs Peak as a teenager. Then later on as an adult he brought the family, my family, out to Estes Park in the summertime. He was a college professor of mathematics, so he had the entire summer off. I think the first time I came to Colorado was in 1967, the year that I was born. I was six months old and we spent a couple of weeks here. The only reason I know that is family slides. Then we visited again when I was four years old so that would be 1971. Then beginning in

1974 my family came out here for the entire three months of the summer. So I grew up a quarter of my life in Estes Park. The basic plan of action all summer long was just hike as much as we could. My parents maintained a little hiking list on the refrigerator that had all the kid's names on it and their names. As the summer progressed we go to Mills Lake and Black Lake and climb Twin Sisters and Flat Top and Longs Peak. I climbed Longs Peak first when I was nine years old. So somewhere in there my older brother and I just were attracted to more difficult scrambling. I can point to three or four people or places or items that brought us to rock climbing. The first of those I would say is the fact that in 1977 we rented a one room cabin, the Menard Cabins up on Riverside Drive. Our neighbor just happened to be Ray Northcutt who is one of the more famous climbers around here. His son Eric was a little bit older than my older brother John but as neighbors we became playmates. Ray and his wife Nancy became friends of my parents. We learned about rock climbing through Mr. Northcutt, as he was known back then. In fact I've got a little book here, "Longs Peak, It's Story and a Climbing Guide". It's the early guide that a lot of people bought, it was written by Paul Nesbit and it's signed by Ray Northcutt. He signed this, I think a few years after we met him and knew about his climbing. We also have it signed by Dave Rearick and Bob Kamps, they were of course instrumental in the history in climbing the Diamond. They were the first to climb the Diamond. I think it was 1991 that Jim Detterline put together the Longs Peak Symposium. So a bunch of people associated with climbing on Longs Peak were gathered and Kamps and Rearick were among those. They actually stayed in our house. Layton Kor slept in my bed because he was also part of that. The reason our house was kind of open was because my sister at the time was a Longs Peak Ranger. But that's skipping ahead a little bit.

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Again we were neighbors with Ray Northcutt and Eric his son, and my older brother John and I did a little bit of scrambling around on the rocks nearby, Rock Acres in particular. There's condos there now, there didn't used to be anything there. Then as time went on and John and I again just were rubbing shoulders with the rock climbers in the area. Probably mostly because we would go to Komito Boots just about every summer to get new boots for all the kids for hiking. Fantasy Ridge was housed in the same building that Komito had his shop in. So John and I would go talk to the climbing guides up there. Then there's another book I'd like to show that was really influential in our choice to climb. That's this book called "Climb" by Godfrey and Chelton, it's a very well done history of rock climbing in Colorado. My parents bought this, not this actual copy, this is my copy. They had a hard cover copy and they bought it as a coffee table book. John and I poured over those pictures just endlessly, particularly in the cold winters in Wisconsin. That really drew us too, "We want to do this." As a matter of fact, there are a few passages in this book that I could

call up John right now and say for example, "If Buhl thought that," and he could finish my sentence, "then we did." Or the big walls, he could say "The big walls," because that was one of the phrases that they used in interviewing Layton Kor. Another one would be, "Lots of energy in." And my brother would instantly say, "Lettuce," because again stories about Layton Kor that are in this book. So we decided we'd better become climbers, just because we thought all of this was really neat. We were still pretty young, ten years old in 1977, that was me and my older brother was 12. We started to accumulate a little bit of rock climbing gear from the used gear box at Fantasy Ridge. The guides would sometimes sell their gear. We bought a little 20' rope, if you can imagine, that was the size of our rope. And it was an 8mm rope which is essentially accessory cord, but it was our first climbing rope. Then we bought about four chocks to straight sided stoppers, maybe a hexentric. In fact one the hexentrics that I think we will look at after this interview, its got COV stamped in it. That was Covington, Michael Covington. He was one of the heroes in this region and he was certainly one of our heroes. Basically anybody that was working at Fantasy Ridge, we figured these are the giants of climbing in Estes Park. So to have a chock, one of our early chocks that had Michael Covington on it, that thing had been places for sure. We bought some carabineers and some webbing to fashion harnesses from, and slowly started to use the stuff. There's a picture I'll show you later of John and I rappelling out of a tree in Wisconsin. So we just taught ourselves how to do this. It was Royal Robbins books, he had "Basic Rock Craft," that was one of them and "Advanced Rock Craft." We bought those two books and read the pages just religiously over and over until we could figure how to do this. We asked questions of the guys at Fantasy Ridge too. It was a very slow process for sure, again we were very young kids so we didn't do a whole lot with the gear that we had accumulated up to that point. My parents though, they could see that we were moving toward wanting to be true rock climbers. So they decided to enroll in a class, Basic Rock, that was one of the classes that was offered at Fantasy Ridge. This was 1978 I believe. They wanted to try rock climbing themselves before they let their kids get into the sport. It wasn't until a number of years later that we discovered their guide for the day was John Bachar who was at that time one of the most famous American climbers, still is one of the most famous American climbers, of course he's deceased now. So just to know that my parents climbed with John Bachar and all these weird things, being a neighbor with Ray Northcutt, bumping shoulders with the greats at Fantasy Ridge, it was almost as though we were met to be climbers. After that climbing class my parents decided we were too young so we couldn't really do anything with it. But we started bouldering a little bit on hikes. I can picture in my mind's eye this boulder off the trail near the Glacier Gorge Parking Lot that was one of our first conquests, if you will. It's 12 feet high, but I remember just being terrified getting to the top of it. Then figuring out how are we going to get down from this thing. As my parents

were watching us toy around with this. There was another climb just off of the trail that goes up to Nymph Lake, no it's just above Nymph Lake. So you get to Nymph Lake from Bear Lake and then the trail goes around and it's rising up to Dream Lake and there's some slabs off on the right that are maybe 30, 40 feet high. They're very low angel, they're probably third class. John and I climbed those, I think with our 20' rope. We may have free soloed it but I also think we may have had our rope along. My parents were not really happy watching this unfold, they had agreed that we could try it, but I think they didn't really like watching their boys get into a dangerous spot. So, like I said, they were a little bit cautious about letting us get into rock climbing.

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It wasn't until 1980 that we finally convinced them we were ready for it. We ended up ordering a bunch of gear; we were in Wisconsin preparing to come out to Colorado for another summer. We ordered a bunch of gear from REI, 20 carabineers, some stoppers, some hexentrics, some webbing for harnesses; I don't think we bought harnesses for quite a while. We didn't get rock shoes either, but we must have ordered the rope. So we ordered all this stuff, we were ready to jump into climbing, then my dad got sick that spring actually. He had some thyroid problems and ended up being hospitalized and we cancelled our trip to Estes Park that summer. So we took all of our gear and sent it back to REI and got our money back. It might have been our guardian angels that were looking out for us at that point because had we gone to Estes Park as planned, I would have been 13 years old, John was 15 and we would have started climbing for real. It might have been a little bit too young for two boys that were just trying to figure it out on their own. We didn't take any classes or anything like that. We had the Fantasy Ridge guides to ask questions about. We did have those instructional books by Robbins but we learned how to climb on our own two years later when we eventually convinced my mom and dad, actually I think it was three years later. It was 1983 and we convinced my mom and dad to buy us a rope. My dad actually had some interest in getting us into climbing because he wanted to take the family up the cables on Longs Peak, on the North Face. He had climbed the cables as a kid, but of course they were taken down I think in the early '70s, so the Keyhole Route was the normal route. But John and I got this Goldline rope from Steve Komito, from his shop. Kermmentie ropes were available if I remember.

Interviewer: What kind is that?

Bernard Gillette: Kernnmantle rope, that's the kind of ropes we climb on these days. Those were available, I think in the late '60s. They're the standard nylon rope with a core and then a mantel over them. But we bought this Goldline which was sort of a throwback to the '50s almost and I wonder, just looking back at it, whether Komito had this rope in his shop for 12, 15

years and it never sold and we were just the kids that he decided he'd dump this rope on. But that was our first rope and we took it out, I think it was the Thumb up on Prospect Mountain. That was our first climb ever that we could call it a "true climb." Again, that 20' rope we did some things near Mary's Lake, we rappelled off Churchill Boulder with that 20' rope and some of the other things that I've already mentioned. Our first real climb was on the Thumb. I don't even know if we had a guide book, we might have just had a recommendation from the Fantasy Ridge guys to go climb, see whether or not we could get to the top. That climb, I don't remember much of the details but I remember a few details that really stand out. One in particular, I led the first pitch and it was about fourth class. I took my kids up that actually just this fall. I was trying to remember exactly where I went so many years ago. There was this little pod in the rock face that I decided I'd belay at, and it was maybe 10' below this huge ledge. An obvious ledge to anybody that had been climbing a long time but I just didn't even see it. So I belayed in this tiny little pod and I belayed with a single, I think it was a number four stopper. Again, I just see this in my mind's eye, it was one of the few pieces of gear that we had. My brother got up to me and was terrified that I was belaying off a one piece of gear that was poorly placed. He saw the ledge above us and he decided he'd lead up to that ledge. So he led this very short 10', 15' pitch and brought me up. Then we traversed around the ledge and I don't know when we started this climb, because I've got some notes that go all the way back to that era, I've been keeping a diary of my climbs for the last 33 years. So I looked at some of those notes in preparation for this interview and it says that, "We retreated because it got dark." So that may be the case but I also have a memory that we retreated because we were just too scared to go on. The reason I brought up I'm not sure when we started the climb, we could have started the climb at 4:00 in the afternoon and it might have taken us three hours, just to get to that point because we were so slow and every step of the way was horrifying. We ended up rappelling though off of this boulder that I think had a sling on it. Maybe we left our own sling. Again just looking back at that and returning to that boulder 30 years later and realizing that I can move it, it's scary to think of what we did when we were kids. I guess we were light weight and the boulder was fine. So we came back to that climb a couple of days later, we were living on Ranch Circle, my parents had purchased a summer home at that point and it was a natural place for us to climb and we ended up making it to the summit. So that was our first success I guess.

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Interviewer: What route was that?

Bernard Gillette: It's not even a named route. It starts between the Thumb and what is now called the Thimble. It's on the south side, the south edge. I could show it to you but it's not in my guide book, it's just this easiest way to get up the

Thumb. It ends in the West Chimney if I'm not mistaken. That is something that is described in one of my guide books. So after that success I think we climbed the Needle shortly thereafter, just the fourth class route up the Needle, or it might be rated 5.0 these days. Then we got our first guide book, we purchased this guide book from Komito's shop. It was written by Richard Dumais. Any of these guys that have written a guide book or whose name was in a guide book, we regarded all of these people in the climbing community as our heroes. We hadn't really met them, well a few of them we had met, but we certainly didn't know them as children. This guide book can be described only as a joke. It was this tiny little book that was about 3" by 5" maybe 30 pages and it gave very scant information about some climbs at Lumpy Ridge and some climbs I think in Rocky Mountain National Park. The topo for the book was literally just a scribble that maybe outlined the Book Formation and then a J-Crack and then Howling at the Wind Dihedral, maybe a couple of lines for the Pages Wall. That was it. Again a very scant, a couple of paragraphs to describe the route Osiris. Then over on the Twin Owls, again the topo was just hilariously bad. Twin Owls and here's the Central Chimney, there's the Crack of Fear. I wish I could show you the book, it's my brother's book so he's got it back in Wisconsin. That book was what took us to the mountains, took us to Lumpy Ridge. So our first route at Lumpy Ridge probably recommended to us by the Fantasy Ridge guides was Organ Pipes on the Twin Owls. This would have been 1984. I realize that I actually just skipped over the end of 1983. Let me backtrack actually. After the success of climbing the Thumb and the Needle, my parents decided we knew enough about climbing that we could do what my dad wanted to and that is to take the family up the North Face of Longs Peak. So we all hiked up to the Cable Route and John and I led the thing. I can't even remember which of my family members were around. I doubt it was the whole family because I come from a pretty big family. There's eight kids and my mom and dad. But my guess is that my mom and dad were along, certainly John and I and probably my older sisters Maria and Joan. And then my younger brother and sister, Robert and Mary, they probably didn't come along on that. My older sisters beyond that, Pat and Ann, they actually weren't with us for many of those summers because they were older than the six children that my mom and dad had. My dad was married to his first wife for seven or eight years and had two kids and then she ended dying, actually in a tragic accident in Rocky Mountain National Park. She slipped down Tyndall Glacier when they were descending from Hallett and died. I think it was in 1957. It is surprising to me to know that that is part of my father's history, because he was hiking with her and she slid several hundred feet and landed on some rocks. That he continued to come to the mountains and take his family out into the mountains. That was part of his family tradition and he was very much a mountaineer his whole life, at least a strong hiker. He did some climbing later but it's surprising that he let his young boys go learn climbing.

Anyway, we went up to the North Face and successfully climbed up the cables and summited Longs Peak. I would have been 16 years old, I think, and John would have 18 at this point. So then it was the next year, 1984 that we started climbing at Lumpy Ridge and climbed Organ Pipes as I mentioned. Then our next big climb at Lumpy Ridge was Osiris on the Book, again with that lousy topo. Somehow we found the route. Took us three attempts. I believe the first time we went out there we got done with the first pitch and we were just thoroughly exhausted so we rappelled off. Then the second time we got up two pitches and I think we were starting up the third pitch and it started to rain so we had to down climb. If I'm remembering correctly, John was leading that pitch, it was the crux pitch and he was nearing the crux when it started to rain. He down climbed the whole pitch, that was actually part of the tradition of climbing back then I think. That you down climbed a lot more if you got yourself into trouble under a spot you weren't able to get past. You just down climbed and come back another day. Certainly you might also rappel off of a piece of gear. The little gear that John and I owned was very precious to us and we bought it with our allowance money so it was kind of unthinkable to leave a piece of gear. The third time that we came back to Osiris we were able to get all the way to the top. I was climbing in a pair of Kletter shoes that were really my hiking boots, bought at Komito's. John was climbing in basketball shoes. We did not have rock climbing shoes; we didn't have the money for it. It might have been the end of 1984 that we finally, so I guess at the end of that first long summer of climbing we did get some rock shoes. John was working as a bus boy perhaps in a restaurant and I wasn't working yet, I was just goofing around in the summers. My mom bought me a pair of shoes and John bought shoes from his own work money. I think mine were a pair of Asolos and then John bought some EB's which were the shoe of the day. By the time 1984 came to an end we had climbed many pitches of 5.6, 5.7, 5.8. We were just starting to get into 5.9 and we aspired to climb the Petit Grepon. That was a Fifty Classic Climb of North America. That book was another book that we purchased early on in our climbing career and that we just spent endless hours reading about all the different classic climbs around the country. So we got up Petit Grepon and my mom in celebration of that event went down to the local t-shirt shop and made us these Petit Grepon sweatshirts actually. She showed them a picture of the Petit Grepon that we had taken and they fashioned a little design and stamped it on our shirts. So we had this really cool memento of that climb from 1984. It's with me today, I'll show it to you later.

Interviewer: Did you bivvy beforehand?

Bernard Gillette: We probably did, I don't remember but I do recall that in the early years of our climbing in Rocky Mountain National Park, not at Lumpy Ridge, the

bigger climbs we certainly slept at the base of the walls where the thought we should. Later on, all in one day was kind of our preference. Yeah, we slept at the base of Spearhead, at the base of Hallett, well maybe no Hallett because I don't think you could have. I'm sure we slept up at Sky Pond at least at one point. Whether or not we did before that climb, I can't remember. But that climb took us all day long, it was very slow. We just didn't climb that fast, we were young kids. Then at the end of that summer on our drive back to Wisconsin, again we returned to Wisconsin every school year, that's where my dad worked. We convinced my mom and dad to go by the Devil's Tower, which is another Fifty Classic Climb and we were able to get up that as well. So returning to Estes Park in 1985 we just kept repeating that. Every single summer we'd come back really hungry for climbing because there wasn't a whole lot of opportunity to climb in Wisconsin. There were some climbs that we definitely did in Wisconsin but it was cold in the wintertime and at least during high school we didn't have access to a car to drive down to Devil's Lake, for example which is the big

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Wisconsin climbing area. So we get done with nine months of not a whole lot of climbing activity, really, really wanting to get out to Lumpy Ridge again. We would climb as many days as we could, just six days a week we would climb. I've got again this diary of mine that goes back 30 years, more than 30 years. Entries in here from say 1985 and I'll look at these days and realize, "I climbed twice this day." That I'd go out to Lumpy Ridge with my brother in the morning and then maybe he went to work. Then I'd go out to Lumpy Ridge with another friend in the evening. I'd do double work outs out at Lumpy Ridge. That happened frequently. So we were climbing as much as we could and gaining quite a bit of experience. That just continued for the next 30 years.

Interviewer: You mentioned in the early years climbing exclusively with your brother and then you started to expand to other partners. Who were your other climbing partners?

Bernard Gillette: That's a good question, certainly John and I, we formed a core partnership that has lived to this day. Though he moved back to Wisconsin permanently, he was, I'm getting ahead of myself, let me go back to our early summers in Estes Park. John and I climbed together almost exclusively with nobody else that first summer. My younger brother Robert, who is four years younger than me, he started to come on to becoming a regular partner, but I don't think that started to happen until 1985. My sisters, they would do a little bit of climbing with us. We'd take



them out on easy climbs. I really don't think we started to climb with other people until 1985 and even during that summer there weren't a whole lot of partners other than my older brother John and my younger brother Robert. It's just ideal, to have a partner that was immediately right there whenever you wanted to go. Climbing with your brothers too, what a fantastic way to grow up. But I think of the people in Estes Park that were, again these people that we thought of as famous climbers, Rusty George may have been the first person that I climbed with. He worked at Fantasy Ridge as so many of the good climbers did. I don't know that I could identify without looking back at my notes, which climb we might have done first. I do know that it was Rusty that kind of introduced me to Douglas Snively who was working at Komito Boots and he also worked at Fantasy Ridge over the years as a climbing guide. Douglas, Rusty and I went out bouldering one time and I think as I look back at it, it was sort of my interview if you will to see whether or not I was good enough for these guys to want to waste too much time with. So we went bouldering and surprisingly I was able to do most of the boulder problems that they were throwing at me. Douglas and I decided to go climbing one day and I think that was 1985 that that happened. Again, it may have started in 1986. Once I started climbing with Douglas he was one of the core figures in the Estes Park climbing. You just started to learn all his friends. I'd climb with Richard Dumais, Scott Kimball, Randy Joseph, Harry Kent, all these guys that we really did think of as our heroes. Anybody whose name was in the guidebook, I think I mentioned this earlier; we gave them very high respect. When I started climbing with these guys I was 18 years old, it just was amazing to me. It was also really nice just to be part of that older set of climbers; all of these guys were 10 and 15 years older than me. There was somewhere in there that my brother and I, our work schedules maybe didn't allow us to climb together as much as we did in the early years that we started climbing with other friends. In particular, I got a job, I think my second year in college, working at Ed's Cantina. Two twins, Chris Hill and Jerry Hill, they were also working at Ed's Cantina and they became my friends, and Sean Preston was another Ed's Cantina cook. All of us were exploring climbing at that point and we became this very close knit group of friends from Ed's Cantina that went climbing every day that we could. We had an ideal job for it because our cook shift would start around 3:00 in the afternoon, so we'd go climbing from 9:00 to 2:00 out at Lumpy Ridge. Or sometime we'd do a daring move and wake up at 4:00 in the morning and try to squeeze in a route up Hallett and try to get back to work. Didn't always work out. Our boss Ed, the guy for whom Ed's Cantina is named, he was understanding if we got to work an hour late every once in a while, it wouldn't be the end of the world. Trying to remember some of the other guys that worked at Ed's Cantina, Don Otten, Dean Rhode, a kid named Kevin Sharkness came on a little bit later. So all these guys formed the core set of friends that were my own age and then again I was climbing with Douglas and all of his friends. Those two

worlds, they didn't collide too much, it was kind of interesting I had a foot in both worlds. Douglas and Rusty George, they wouldn't climb with the other buddies that I climbed with. So I felt really privileged to be part of that older set of climbers. They taught me a lot of tricks and just gave me the mileage and confidence to try harder and harder climbs.

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Interviewer: You talked about kind of pouring over the books to learn the mechanics of climbing, building anchors and all the technical knowledge that you need to gain. But when you are with Douglas or Harry Kent, were they introducing you to some of the techniques of movement?

Bernard Gillette: By the time I was climbing with them I would say that we knew how to belay, we knew how to set gear well. I don't think they would have gone climbing with me had I not shown some proficiency in that and had a string of successes on the test pieces of the day, I guess.

Interviewer: I suppose the physicality, the techniques of lie backing or foot work.

Bernard Gillette: Yeah, in some respect I'm sure that those guys gave us some pointers. When I say us, now and again John would climb with them too, but really this circle of friends was mostly mine. John had another circle of friends, he was a Long's Peak Ranger, he worked at the entrance booth in think in the early years in his employment at Rocky Mountain National Park. A lot of my brothers and sisters worked in the Park over the years. He had a circle of ranger friends that were climbers that I didn't tend to climb with. His friends were also kind of more experienced than we were. Yeah, I'm sure we absorbed techniques and just watching a better climber go through move, you're going to try the same thing. But I think it's also true that we just experimented on our own and over the years you accumulate tricks that work. Or magazine articles, I remember learning about the "flag move" where you kick your leg behind the other leg. That was later on though; I think that was when sport climbing started to come into the foray [?]. In the early years of climbing it was just move your hands and feet up as the rock terrain allowed, we didn't do anything too fancy.

Interviewer: Can we talk a little bit about route development?

Bernard Gillette: Sure, new routes I'm imagining you're thinking. Yeah, the progression from climbing all the routes that are listed in the guide book that have three stars and after you go through those you climb the two star routes. It just becomes natural I think to look at the portions of the rock that haven't been climbed on. I was certainly drawn to doing first assents partly for the fame involved, if you will. Again, these guys that were listed as the first assents of the routes that we were doing, we thought of them as the heroes of the area. We wanted some of that. Being involved with these older guys that did do first assents, that was an easy route into it as well. I think

probably some of my early first assents were just John and I, but then Douglas and I started putting up routes. Douglas was usually the leader of those early forays I'd say. As far as memorable first assents, most of my early first assents were kind of junk piles. They were the left overs that the first wave of climbers, or the third wave of climbers depending on when you want to call the first wave, they were the left overs that hadn't been don't yet because they weren't all that great a climb. I'd have to look again through my diary to just remind myself, I've done so many climbs over the years that it's hard for me to remember every route that I did. I certainly know that after those first ten years of climbing Lumpy Ridge, the pinnacle of my assents was El Camino Real. That's this hard route on the Book, it's 5.12d, I think it's in my book as 5.12c but I've had other people tell me, "No, it's probably 5.12d." That was in 1992 and it was the hardest climb that I'd ever done by a long shot. I think I'd redpointed some 5.12b's up to that point, so it was a really big leap in my own abilities. To have it come on a first ascent was really special for me. It also was probably one of the hardest pitches at Lumpy Ridge at the time, there were a couple of other 5.12c's that had been established in that same time period. Randy Ferris and Mike Caldwell had put up Renaissance Wall on the Book, I think that was 5.12c. Then there was a short little route that I think again, Randy was involved with on a boulder near the base of the Book that was 5.12c. So El Camino Real was the culmination of a long list of first assents that got harder and kind of got better, higher quality, that's a fantastic experience for me.

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Interviewer: So you did the first free ascent, had it been aid climbed previously?

Bernard Gillette: Yes it had. It was an aid climb from 1980. Erin Walters was the first ascent, he may have rope solo aided it, I'd have to look to remember whether or not, he may have had a partner too. Oh, I think Bob Bradley actually was his partner. So those guys went out and nailed it and I actually looked in my diary prior to coming here today to remind myself of how El Camino Real developed for my own, when did I decide, "This is a route that I should try." My notes say that I went out and climbed it as an aid climb looking to see whether or not it could be free climbed. So I was out actively looking for new free climbs and realized, "Well here's a fantastic looking crack that nobody has done before as a free climb." So I rope solo aided it I think, though I may have done it with a partner and remember it as fairly straight forward A3. I also noticed that this could be something that could be free climbed; I saw good holds here and there and some other stretches that were going to be difficult. So I returned I think it was the next day and started top roping it and realized, "I can do all the moves." I was falling all over the place but I think I linked from the bottom to the top, every single move by the time our session was done that day. Then over the next few days I determined where I needed to place a

couple of bolts and got those placed and then determined where all the rest of the pieces were going to go. When I was working on hard routes like that I would draw beta maps, those are just little maps that climbers use to help visualize the climb. It shows me the crack from start to finish with each piece of gear that I'm going to place. Little line here for the left hand and then right hand and annotations on the beta map that allow me to sit in my chair at home and basically climb the thing. Visualization is one of the techniques that top athletes use in a variety of disciplines. Somewhere in that ten years of initial climbing I started to use that technique myself. I would go to bed at night for a lot of these hard climbs and climb a route two or three times before I drifted off to sleep. The map, my beta map for El Camino Real showed everything from bottom to top, how it all was going to be put together. I learned that over a few visits. Once I got to the point where I could see that it was possible, I think it took me three more tries, up to that point I'd put in three tries and I redpointed it on my sixth try. It was again the hardest thing that I had ever done. I had met with heartbreaking defeat the last two tries where I had done it with one fall, literally in the last 15 feet of the climb. But it's such a pumpy climb that it keeps coming after you and my hands would just let go. I couldn't grab on any more. When I got to the top of that climb, that was just fantastic. I want to say fantastic release of emotion. I wasn't crying or anything like that, though I have cried in the mountains before. Wow, that was really something else to get to the top of that climb.

14:33

Interviewer: How do you manage self-doubt and frustration and fear and all of those emotions that come into a pumpy scary climb?

Bernard Gillette: Experience, I'm sure has a huge amount to do with it because I would say in the early years of our climbing we didn't manage it. We were redlined on our adrenaline from the start of the climb to the top of the climb. Sixteen, seventeen years old and our climbs were terrifying. Frankly that was one of the things that drew us to go out climbing the next day, it was an incredible experience. It's not until you've climbed, I think, many years and start to learn how to battle back that fear that you can start to climb a little bit more in control. The self-doubt part, how do you battle that? That is something that is just really hard for me, in fact when I go to a climb that has been giving me trouble that I need to make several attempts before I redpoint the thing, one of the hardest things for me, the biggest fears that I have is failure. I start at the bottom of the climb and I know it's going to give me everything that I've got because I've tried on it a few times before and I've failed on it before. I know that it's going to take every effort that I have and that when I get to the top I'm going to be redlined in terms of my physical ability. Doubt definitely creeps into that equation. How I overcome that? I think again just part of the thing that draws me to climbing is such an amazing test, a personal test. I like testing

myself and I know that it's going to make me a better person when I get to the top of that climb. People listening to this interview might think, "How is climbing going to make you a better person?" I am certain that the climbing that I've done and the things I've had to overcome out there in the climbing world are directly translated to my work life. My life as a father of five children and a husband to my wife. You know that certain tasks are hard but they pale in comparison to redpointing a 5.12d or something like that. So if I'm given a hard task at work, I can just look at it and say, "This is not going to be any worse than climbing the Diamond. In fact it's probably going to be a whole lot easier. I'm not going to risk my life." It just makes that task a lot mellower to tackle. I maybe strayed off a little bit from your original question of what it is that I do to help overcome these barriers, but again you just keep trying and having success, having thirty years of succeeding on climbs. That helps I'm sure, at least in my current climbing.

Interviewer: How does it feel to get feedback from somebody who's repeated that route, you catalogue it as a 5.12c and they go, "No, it's definitely at a d."

Bernard Gillette: Those kind of disagreements about a route's rating, at least at this point in my life, I just don't care. It's part of the climbing world, we can't put an exact grade on anything. I think maybe in my early years, if I had rated a route 5.11a and somebody came back and told me it's only 5.10+, it might have been a little bit of a hit to my ego. But frankly this many years in the climbing, it just doesn't matter to me anymore. If somebody comes back and tells me that a route that I rated 5.12c is 5.12d, I'll say, "Yeah, that's fine." It's an unimportant detail I would say.

18:29

Interviewer: You mentioned a little bit about establishing routes with Douglas Snively and that you would place bolts. Tell me, how did you develop these sport climbs and why did you think there was a need to bring sport climbing forward in Estes Park.

Bernard Gillette: I don't think that I can claim to have brought sport climbing to Estes Park at all. Bolting certainly, when I started climbing was very controversial, not just in Estes Park but in the climbing world in general. There were endless magazine articles about it. There was this event that was taking place called "The Great Debate" where some of the greats in climbing, John Bachar among them. I think Lynn Hill was part of the deal. They had this panel of climbers debate whether or not bolting should be part of climbing. I think Alan Watts was on that Great Debate. The debate about whether or not bolting was a reasonable thing, that took place I think in the mid to late '80s and frankly I just wasn't putting up new routes at that point. Of if I was, they were these unimportant little 5.8's. Mike Caldwell was one of the early people to embrace the idea of putting in a bolt on rappel. Up to that point leading was the sort of agreed upon ethic, that if

you're going to put in a bolt you should do it from a stance or maybe from a hook and drill it on the lead. So Mike decided that he thought that was a bad way to do it. There are many many climbs that are out there where leading them would be very difficult to put in a bolt and he got some flak from that. There was a route out on the Pear that I remember talking to him about, when I did research for my guides and just found out his story of how this all went down. Where people in the climbing community were not real happy with what he had done. But he had a very strong spine, like I think a lot of climbers, he's individualistic, he marches to his own drummer. We all do. He had a thick skin and was able to take the abuse that he got from other members of the community. Looking back on it, he was right. That there are plenty of climbs out there that demand rappelling to put the bolts in. It's a reasonable way to put them in. I was very much against it, I was part of the traditional climbing where you weren't supposed to use chalk, you weren't supposed to hang on your gear, all the rest of that. The leader must not fall, I grew up with those as the rules of the game. I don't think I really stated placing bolts; El Camino Real actually might have been one of the early routes where I placed bolts. That was mostly a gear climb, I put just two bolts in for protection. I think there's just two; maybe there are three and then two bolts up at the rappel station. Most of my climbs were gear routes or maybe a bolt or two that would connect cracks. As time went on, bolting just became more and more acceptable. I think it was with Douglas [Snively] that he bought a drill, an electric drill, and we started bolting routes together. But this was past any of the controversy I think. By that point the community had accepted the idea that it's ok to bolt within reason.

Interviewer: This is in the mid to late 1990s.

Bernard Gillette: Yep, there may have been some early routes in the 1990s that Douglas and I put up with bolts, we did a route on Mary's Bust, I could look at my guidebook to find out the exact date, that was just a single pitch and we bolted that with Douglas' drill, I remember. I returned to Mary's Bust in the last few years actually and put in a whole bunch of bolts and a whole bunch of really fantastic routes actually. Again, back in the mid-1990s when I started to put in bolts, I just don't remember any controversy about it. I tended by the way, to put my bolts in on rappel. Douglas and I, I remember did a route on the Pear where he was leading and he was drilling on the lead, but that's one of the few routes that I remember putting in a bolt on the lead and I wasn't on the lead.

Interviewer: Did you encounter any park rangers or any authority figures coming from the Forest Service or National Park Service who were not informed about fixed gear on rock? How did you manage that?

Bernard Gillette: Actually I do remember an encounter with a ranger one time out at Lumpy Ridge. It wasn't in conjunction with a bolt placement. I was trying to put up a new route on the Book called The Adventures of B-Dog, that name

has a history that we won't go into right now. I had top roped it if I remember correctly, and then I was going to go and see whether or not I needed to put some bolts in and it was a rainy day. I ran out there and climbed around the back side and rappelled off. There were some rangers at the residence out there at the Twin Owls parking lot that just lived there all summer long. I wonder if one of them just saw me going out there on a rainy day and decided to follow me, cause it just surprised me when he showed up at the base of the rock and asked me what I was doing. It turns out that what I was doing was taking a few pitons and banging them into the rock and deciding whether or not they were going to offer a reasonable protection. That was a perfectly legal thing to do, you can still place pitons today, that's not part of the bolting ban that was enacted around that time. But he really didn't like seeing

24:42 [End of Part B.]

[C].

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me bang a piton into the rock and then I was banging it out to see whether or not, how well it was in there. I ended up not placing it there. So I think he got a little bit accusatory with me, was wondering whether or not I was banging pitons in and out of the rock in order to create a placement. It wasn't the case and I can understand his suspicion, why would I be out there on a rainy day when nobody else was going to be around? The reason I would do it on a rainy day is I do a lot of my new route exploring on days where there isn't going to be good climbing. Because frankly, doing new routes is a lot of work and a lot of the grunt work, it's not fun to do with another person. If you're going to be removing loose rocks from a route for example, you don't want to do it with a partner around. So this was just normal for me. In terms of Rocky Mountain National Park and the rangers, the bolting ban that was enacted, I can't remember exactly what year. I thought that was actually a reasonable thing for them to do. We had this situation where bolting was allowed and a lot of people in Eldorado Canyon for example, down in Boulder and Boulder Canyon, were putting in more bolts than what people thought were reasonable. I think there were some routes up here in Estes Park that the general sense of the community was also, "This is too many bolts, we don't want to just pepper our rocks with bolts." So I recall for myself that when Rocky Mountain National Park banned power drilling at least, you could only drill by hand, it seemed like a reasonable decision as far as I was concerned. I never had any adverse interaction with the park people because I knew a lot of them, they were friends of mine. I climbed with a lot of them, again my brother was a Longs Peak Ranger. So Jim Detterline, Billy Westbay, I can't believe I didn't mention Billy early on as one of our huge heroes. In fact I have an entry again in my diary that I read in the last couple of days reminding me of the first time that I

climbed the Diamond and John was, I don't think working as a Longs Peak Ranger then, but because he was working in the entrance booth, he could get a key for the cabin up there. So we got a key for the Chasm Lake Cabin and scheduled a night up there and we're getting ready to finish off dinner and a knock comes on the door and it turns out that Doug Snively and Billy Westbay also were going to go into the cabin. They didn't really need to sign up for it because Billy was a Longs Peak Ranger so he could go up to the cabin whenever he wanted to. Anyway we ended up spending the night with Douglas Snively, who I had not yet climbed with I don't think, and Billy Westbay who is among the nation's eminent climbers. This was all before the first ascent of the Casual Route on the Diamond for us, the first time up the Diamond. So that was a big night for us, just "Wow, we're spending the night with Billy Westbay and Doug Snively." I knew these guys in the Park Service, we climbed with them, they were good friends of ours.

Interviewer: What was Westbay like?

Bernard Gillette: I didn't climb a whole lot with Billy. He was definitely assured of his abilities, I don't know if I want to use the word cocky, but he had an ego to him, well deserved. He was a fantastic climber. I think this is kind of the way it might be with a lot of people that when you climb with a new person you want to show what you're capable of. It was obvious the first few times I climbed with Billy that he was the better climber. As time went on and both Billy and Douglas got older and I got better, they started to regard me as a little bit of the rope gun, they would stick me on the hard pitches. I remember going down to Eldorado Canyon, climbing with Billy and Douglas and they made me lead the 5.11 pitches. That initial impression of Billy as a bit cocky, I think that softened as I got to know him. This is true for a lot of the climbing relationships that I've been it. That when you climb with someone that is better than you, you're initially intimidated for sure and I think they want to show their place in sort of the status, if you will. But as you get to know these guys, they're fantastic guys, they're normal everyday people and they're super kind, they want to share climbing with you. Again, I feel just so privileged to be part of that older generation of climbers. It was almost as though I didn't belong cause I'm so much younger than they are. It gave me a lot of respect for what went before me.

04:54

Interviewer: Ok, some time has passed, you've really acquired a great deal of experience in the area and I'm wondering what propelled you to set out to write a guidebook, guidebooks of the area?

Bernard Gillette: Good question. I have a very definite memory of running into some friends from Wisconsin. I might have been 20, 21 years old and again we lived in Wisconsin in the wintertime and I went to the University of



Wisconsin at Madison. It was at that point that Devil's Lake became my backyard climbing area in the winter months. So I knew a bunch of Devil's Lake climbers and I was out in Estes Park, I think on the Twin Owls, and ran into a few of my buddies from Devil's Lake. These were older guys again, for some reason I climbed with a lot of people that were older than me. Maybe because younger 18 year olds, 19 year olds, they really didn't start climbing. I think a lot of people didn't start climbing until they were in college or even after college. It takes a more mature kid I think to begin climbing, at least back then it did. These days five year olds can go climb in the gym. Anyway, these guys from Devil's Lake showed up and we were talking with one another and I was showing them around the Twin Owls and one of them remarked, "You guys are going to end up writing the next guidebook." They were impressed that we knew so much about the area. I don't think that was the event that propelled me toward writing the guidebook but I'm kind of surprised that that's something in my past. That somebody else saw in me, "Here's a kid that is just steeped in all of the climbing at Lump Ridge, has made it his own and is going to someday write a guidebook to the area." The guy was right. He could see that that would be the way things would unfold. So how it actually happened, I was always interested in writing, it was one of my creative outlets. My mom used to tell me that she just loved the way I would write these long letters. Long before e-mail, that's the way we communicated. I worked hard on just crafting a good sentence. I enjoyed writing and I enjoyed writing letters. I had several pen pals that I maintained relationships with through high school and college. As a matter of fact, just writing letters to my friends in Wisconsin, because we came to Estes Park every summer and I was detached from those friends, that might have been some of the early experiences I had as just writing and expressing my feelings through writing. In any event, it was, I'm not sure of the date, maybe 1992 that Richard Rossiter came out with what he called, "An Interim Guide to Rocky Mountain National Park." Something like that. The Scott Kimball guide that was published in 1986 was no longer available; all of the copies that were printed were sold out. He had moved back to Massachusetts I think, so was not available to do an updated guide. I think the publisher decided to not do anymore copies, again with Scott not there. There may have not been the incentive. So there was a few years when no guidebook was available. Richard Rossiter, very talented guidebook writer for the Boulder climbing area and a friend of mine. He put out this interim guide. He started the guide, on the first page with something along the lines of, "I hate to make excuses but this guide is not done." In fact he was kind of toying around with the project of writing a guide for the area I think, but hadn't come anywhere near completion and decided with his publisher, they would publish something that climbers could use until a more complete book could be done. I think his aim was to do that book or a couple of books on his own. Well, I looked at that book as almost an affront to the beautiful climbing area that

was my home turf. Just thought, “This is horrible that we’ve got this bad book.” I do not want to speak ill of Richard Rossiter, again he’s a friend, we’ve had a very friendly competitive battle, if you will, exchanging publication dates with the books that we’ve published. He’s actually working on a guidebook right now that we’ve e-mailed each other several times in the last year and I’m trying to help him out. He does a great job with his guidebooks. But he will be the first to tell you, “That book was a failure.” It was very incomplete information, the top [topography] was sort of half drawn. But that was what was out there.

09:53

I wanted a better book for my area and started to discuss that with some of my friends. Jim Detterline was among the friends that heard that I might want to write a guidebook. He knew of a publisher back in North Carolina, his name is Bill Webster, and suggested that I get in touch with Bill. Bill and Jim were friends. So I sent out a letter to Bill Webster and told him I’m interested in writing a guidebook to Lumpy Ridge and he wrote back and said, “Well, let me see what you’ve got. Write a sample chapter for me, I want to see whether or not you can write.” This was in 1992, again that’s when Richard’s book came out. This is also the year that I got married, in August 1, 1992. I don’t remember the exact dates when I was exchanging letters with Bill Webster and deciding whether or not I would do this guide, but it was just before my wedding. Because I do remember during my honeymoon we took a trip up into the Canadian Rockies and a bunch of the National Parks in the Western United States. I penned the rough draft of the Book Climbs, the book on Lumpy Ridge in the tent during my honeymoon. My wife was very supportive of that, it’s not as though we spent our whole honeymoon writing the guidebook, but I had to get some progress on it because Bill Webster wanted this chapter. When we had a few down hours in the tent before going to sleep I would start writing my guidebook. I sent that chapter in, Bill really liked it and from there it was just continue to fill in all of the blanks that were outside of that little sample chapter. I think I may have just sent in only the Book, the climbs on the Book which is probably the cliff that I was the most familiar with. So over the next six or seven months that became my focus, trying to complete this guidebook to Lumpy Ridge. It was also coincidentally my last year in graduate school. I was finishing up a master’s degree in mathematics down at the University of Colorado in Boulder. My advisor knew of this book project that I was working on. He also realized that I was sort of missing some of the deadlines that he was setting for me for my master’s thesis. He took me aside and he said, “Look Bernie, you’ve got to choose, either you’re going to this master’s thesis and finish it this semester or go ahead and do your guidebook. I realized I’ve got to do the master’s thesis, so I set the guidebook aside for a while and finished my thesis, got my master’s degree. Then that spring I was hired as a teacher at the University of Colorado that began my career there. I’m still teaching

there. But I was only teaching one class I think and I had a ton of free time and I completed that guidebook. I'd go to campus and teach my class then I'd drive up to Estes Park and maybe run out to the ridge on the other side of Sundance Butte, just to shoot it for guidebook pictures. I took so many hikes where I would look for the ridge opposite the wall that I wanted to shoot and I'd run out there with a tripod and then I took these long hikes in the mountains doing the same thing. Shooting the Diamond, shooting all the walls that any guidebook author has got to take pictures of. I think it was another four or five months that I finally completed it all. My first guidebook was published in 1993.

Interviewer: That's great.

Bernard Gillette: Yeah, it was such a fantastic day too, to get that book, the bound book. I've written many books since then. Not just climbing books, I'm also a writer of math textbooks. The process of writing a book, it's always a long one. It's kind of like climbing a mountain actually; that you just have to realize you've got to take a few steps to get this far down the trail. It's going to take a lot of those before you can get to the top of the mountain. But if you go into it with that mindset, write a few pages today, write a few pages the next day, you'll get there. Even though you're living daily with this book, when you finally see it arrive on your doorstep, between the front and back cover, it's such a gratifying experience. All the books that I've written, in particular my climbing guides have been fantastic experiences for me, really fun.

Interviewer: It might be that feeling of accomplishment when you finish a route and you're standing up top.

Bernard Gillette: Yes, it's definitely that. Again climbing has a way to make life better. There's obvious parallels there, you come back to a climb, a hard climb over and over and you finally redpoint it, that takes a lot of work. But it makes you realize, "I can apply that same plan to other jobs in my life like writing a guidebook or writing a text book."

15:03

Interviewer: What kind of responsibility comes with writing a guidebook?

Bernard Gillette: I felt when I wrote my guidebook in 1993, and again I updated those in 2001, the introductory material that I wrote need to communicate to other climbers the long held traditions here in Estes Park Valley. Those traditions being, at least in 1993, I'd guess I'd have to go back and look at the introduction that I wrote in 1993, at what stage of acceptance of bolts in the area we were. Whether or not there was even a bolt ban back then. I do remember in writing those introductions for both of those books that I wanted to communicate to my readers that Lumpy Ridge was a traditional area and that we shouldn't just stomp all over it. If you're going to place a

bolt you need to be very considerate about it, think about the people that are going to come after. Is this a climb that's even worthy of bolts? There are a lot of climbs that have gone up that in my opinion just never should be bolted. If you have a one star bolt route, it just seems pointless to me, just leave it alone. Bolting a three star route, that seems like a worthy project. I think these days especially if you own a bolt gun and you go do the work of throwing a rope up the cliff and seeing whether or not a line will go, then the decision is, "I'm going to put bolts in it." For myself, I have been much more restrained in my use of bolts. I've top roped a lot of climbs that could have been new routes but I decided this is not worth putting bolts in. I try to communicate those ethics of the people who came before me, of my own ethics of restraint in the use of fixed gear. I'll admit that those ethics have definitely changed over the years. If you look at the routes I was talking about on Mary's Bust, there's six pitches of bolts, that's all there is. I would argue that you really can't protect those climbs any other way. That's a definite departure I would say from the way I felt about bolts in 1993. I think if you talk to any climber there is a progression, an evolution of how we felt about the use of chalk, how we felt about the use of bolts. Even the use of friends, when friends first came on the market, not only did my brother and I think they were mickey-mouse, but we were not alone in thinking they're kind of cheating. When you go climb a crack and the ability to just, boom, put in a cam and clip your rope into it. That's a whole lot different than eyeing a spot in the crack that's going to fit a hexcentric. People thought of using friends as a little bit cheating early on. They're fully embraced now and so I think are bolts. They're fully embraced now; people understand that sport climbing is a valid pursuit. People in the Estes Park area I think feel that the bolted climbs that have gone up here are all reasonable. You will definitely see that, compare say Lumpy Ridge to the Monastery. Completely different areas because of the tradition that is part of Lumpy Ridge. People are not just going to go up and bolt a whole lot of climbs on Lumpy Ridge because I think there's respect of the area. It's also true that the rule of hand bolting very much limits how much bolting that's going to get done at Lumpy Ridge. It's hard to drill a 3/8" hole that's deep enough to accept the modern bolt. It's a lot of work to do that so sport climbing is probably never going to be a big part of the Lumpy Ridge picture. But the National Forest areas that surround Estes Park, I think the sport climbing areas that have gone up have by in large been a real good addition to the community, additional resource.

Interviewer: What's that like to step back and reflect on areas developing like Jurassic Park or Jug Dome, places along Highway 34? What's that like for you?

Bernard Gillette: Part of me feels like that story's still being told for myself. I'm not done climbing. I still aspire to do new routes. I've got actually a new crag out at Lumpy Ridge right now that I put some bolts in. The hand drilling was heinous. It's mostly a crack climbing area. But I still seek out new routes

and so looking back and reflecting upon that, I'm not sure I'm to that part of my life if you will. It's certainly gratifying to come to these areas where I put routes in and see climbers congregating and having a smile on their face. I love going to even Lumpy Ridge, going out to the Book and seeing at the base of the cliff somebody paging through a guide, it's like, "Oh yeah, that's my guide." That's very very fun just to see that happen. I'm not sure if that answers the question the way you intended it.

20:08

Interviewer: I think you're completely correct in saying that, if you were to go to any of the climbs around here, and you ask a climber, "Hey what guidebook have you got in your pack?" It's yours.

Bernard Gillette: It often is, yeah. Richard Rossiter's guide is sometimes out there too. Mine were published after Richard's last efforts so those tend to be the guides that people have right now.

Interviewer: It's interesting because in the Estes Valley Park guidebook, it really is a reflection of you, I think. Because you, as you describe in the interview, have had one foot with these legendary climbers and then one foot being kind of the young gun into the future. I think you reflect that well in the research you did for a nearly 30 page long history section.

Bernard Gillette: Yeah, at the end of that 2001 book I did a better job with that book. Had more time with it and wanted to pay homage if you will to these people in my climbing life that were so important to me. I actually interviewed I think it was eight different people, Steve Komito, Billy Westbay, Douglas Snively, Ray Northcutt, Mike Donahue, Mike Caldwell was one of them, Harry Kent and then there's an eighth whose name escapes me. In any event, these guys were the large, dominated the landscape for me as a kid and I wanted to just find out from them how they went through climbing so that I could write this history section in the guidebook. I will also admit that the book that I referred to earlier, the Godfrey and Shelton, that very much influenced my desire to have something like that for Lumpy Ridge. Cause they told the story of climbing throughout Colorado, but their focus especially in the modern era was on Boulder. Which is understandable, they were Boulder climbers and Boulder was one of the focus points for moving forward in climbing, if you will. I wanted that for Lumpy Ridge and for my guidebook, so yeah I interviewed all these guys. Originally my plan was to include the entire interview but that would have taken too many pages so I pared it down to 30 pages. It's kind of fun to write that history and to write me into it. I worried a little bit about it; it came sort of in the last few pages that this would look a little bit like an ego move on my part. But at the same time I realized, "I've been part of this climbing community for a long time and I'm starting to etch my own name, if you will, on some of the stones."

Interviewer: What kind of themes surfaced in those interviews? What did you learn of your research?

Bernard Gillette: I might have to go back to 2000 when I conducted the interviews to remember for sure. I mean I know that I've read those 30 pages you refer to at the end of the guide. I've read those for myself many times since I wrote them. It's fun for me to return to stuff that I've written and I like what I wrote. It's really fun to just read that 30 pages and smile. What did I learn from those climbers though? I learned certainly some personal tidbits about their history, but I knew all these guys at that point and knew their stories to some extent. I guess I knew what I was going to hear but they filled in some of the details and they gave me material that I weaved together in the narrative that you read when you read the end of the guidebook. I remember Harry Kent, for example, told me that he lived in a cave with Keith Lober. Details like Mike Caldwell ate dog food in Yosemite to survive in the early years. Those sorts of things didn't make it into the history in the back of the book, but yeah, I found out about the interesting things that happened to these guys as they grew through climbing. But most of it I already knew I guess you could say.

Interviewer: One of my last questions here is, "Why is it important for you to get your children and your family involved in climbing?"

24:42 [End of Part C.]

[D].

00:00

Bernard Gillette: To be perfectly honest with you, it's not that important to me to see my kids become climbers. I take them climbing a lot, my wife and I drag them into the mountains as much as we can. So I certainly want to expose them to climbing but I'm not going to worry about it at all if they do not choose to go down my path even one step. Right now they're too young to climb on their own. Katy our oldest is, she's 16, she doesn't have her driver's license yet. She needs me just to get her to the climbs, if we are going to go climbing. But they haven't shown an interest beyond just "daddy time" really. They love to go climbing with me but they're not to the point in their lives where it's something that's caught fire for them. I don't know that it will ever be. I'm not going to push it on them, I want my kids to make those decisions for themselves. On the other hand, I also want my kids to become lovers of the outdoors. Yeah, taking them outside on hiking trips, on camping trips, on big road trips around the United States. My wife and I love sharing that with them. Fourteeners, we're starting to do fourteeners with them. Jeremy our youngest, eight, he got up Yale this last summer. All the girls have been up Longs Peak, I think Elise got up it when she was seven. So we'll continue to climb. But I'm not sure I envision, say ten years down the road, taking Katy up the Diamond. They

talk about that sometimes, Elise asked me within the last month, “How old do I have to be before you’ll take me up the Diamond?” I said, “I don’t know, maybe 18.” She kind of looked at me and said, “Are you going to be still able to get up the Diamond at that point?” But I’m giving her just an answer that she wants to hear. When she’s 18 I don’t have an idea whether or not she will be interested in climbing the Diamond. If she is, yeah, I’d love to climb it with them but I’m not going to push it on them at all.

Interviewer: It sounds like if anything, being in the mountains is in the Gillette’s blood and you’re kind of honoring the same values your parents imparted on you.

Bernard Gillette: Absolutely, in fact if you allow me to say just a little bit more about that. I look back on what my parents did for the children and just the family. I absolutely want to do that for my family. My dad and mom, my mom didn’t work she gave up her career to raise the children; once she started having children she stopped working. She worked part time now and again in the summers just to make ends meet but she gave up her career. My dad had a career that allowed him in the summer months to devote himself completely to his family. Those childhood summers were idyllic. They made our family a very close knit family, lots of love for my brothers and sisters now. When I look at other families and it’s kind of sad to see that that’s not maybe the norm. I’m sure there’s plenty of close knit families out there but there’s a lot of brokenness too. The gift that my mom and dad gave to our family is special. [speaking emotionally] I want to give that to my family too.

03:27

Interviewer: Sounds like you are. Bernard, are there any last stories about climbing you’d like to share?

Bernard Gillette: We could go on for days honestly with the stories that I have gathered throughout my life, climbing stories but I don’t think we want to do that. So I will try to pick out a couple of points that I might identify as important character building experiences for me. I remember, it might have been 1986; I’d need to look at my climbing diary to be sure. I went and did this route on Lumpy Ridge on Gollum’s Arch Rock, called “Facial Hair”. It was a route that Mike Caldwell had put up and I think I came to learn about it either through Mike directly or through Climbing Magazine. Climbing Magazine used to have a little regular column called “Base Camp” and they’d list the first assents from around the country. I think that column went away when the volume of first assents that were being done in the country just became too much to keep track of. In any event, I went out there with my brother John and started to lead the climb and got half way up and I was some distance above my last piece of gear. There’s a bolt maybe six feet above me still and a crux in front of me. This is 1985

I think is when the bolt route was put up, when Mike put the route up. Again, it was 1986 when I was climbing it. This is one of the earlier bolted routes at Lumpy Ridge and because of the long tradition of no bolts at Lumpy Ridge, or very few bolts. The bolts were well spaced, they were maybe 15 feet apart. I became concerned I guess you could say as I'm looking up at this bolt wondering how I'm going to piece together the moves and realizing that every inch that I advanced toward the bolt I'm increasing my fall distance. I kept trying this move over and over again and could not unlock it and realized also that, "I don't think I can down climb what I've done up to that point." The clock started to tick in terms of how long can I hang on to this rock face and play this battle out? Am I going to make it to that bolt or am I going to somehow find the strength within me to down climb far enough that I'm not going to take a real long fall, or am I just going to peel off? I didn't have a whole lot of mileage underneath my belt at this point; this was a hard 5.10 for me. I know that this was not the first 5.10 lead that I did. It was among the harder things that I had done and I was up there for probably 45 minutes just hanging on for my dear life. Trying to get to that bolt, getting more and more tired. My calves are just screaming, they're on fire. This is Lumpy Ridge so it wasn't a super steep climb, at least not in the place that I was at. Somehow I was able to finally unlock that move and get to that bolt. I clipped a quick draw into it and immediately descended to the ground. I was so shaken up at that experience that I went home and had a long talk with my mom and dad. I think there was some crying involved, it really gave me pause about, "Do I really want to do this climbing thing?" Because I was scared to death on that climb, I really did not want to do a 20 foot fall through the air. Leading falls again, were just not part of our experience. Every great once in a while we would have a fall that was unexpected, but those are over so fast that they, those are the falls that aren't real scary, the scary ones are the ones where you're hanging on for dear life and you just know you're going to fall. That visceral feeling that you have, this is going to suck really bad when I come off. So I had that for 45 minutes straight and was terrified. The funny thing is, sun comes up the next day and I realized, "I want to do that again." Because there's also this experience of something like that that is electrifying. I was drawn to it like a moth to a flame as I guess the way you could say it. My brother had an even stronger draw to climbing; he really was the guy that I think started our climbing careers. He was older, he bought more of the gear cause he had more money than I did. So he had that fire under him for sure. After that day I knew I was going continue to climb. The funny thing is the afternoon before when I got home, I was still shaking like a leaf and I was about ready to hang it up. That kind of experience has happened to me a few times afterward. It's a little bit indescribable despite the fact that I'm here describing it to you. The words that I'm finding don't give justice to the experience that I had. I really like that about climbing that it forces you to go to places that you can't get anywhere else. You certainly can't get there



playing tennis, you can't get there anywhere that I've experienced. You have to find an inner strength to overcome that and it's those moments and those victories that I've come away from those unscathed that are part of my character. They are character building moments and I've had a lot of them throughout my career. I guess we could think of some others along the way. I could tell you the time that I started crying on the Diamond. Is that one that you want to hear?

09:33

Interviewer: What happened there?

Bernard Gillette: So another story that might be interesting. I was 18 years old and my brother and I decided that we were going to climb the Diamond, that we had done enough, the foreground work that needs to go on before you are going to do something that demanding. We went up to the Diamond, I think we slept up there above Mills Lake that night. Started up the North Chimney, got to the base of the wall, everything is going well. We were going to do the Casual Route, my brother led the first pitch and I followed, everything going well. Then he led the second pitch and in that 30, 40 minutes that it took him to lead the second pitch, and then he hauled the bags. My mental fortitude just started to crumble. I realized that I was really scared up here and we were 100' above Broadway or 150' above Broadway. We'd been 150' off the ground many many times up to that point. But it really felt big that day, because it is. The Diamond is overwhelming, it's huge. Looking up at the rest of the route, just filled me with a lot of fear, that I didn't want to go on. So my brother got done with the second pitch and he dragged the backpack that we had over to his place and I ended up just flatly refusing to follow his lead. I started crying actually. All my emotions were just coming out and he as my older brother totally understood that. He was in the same boat that I was, he wasn't more experienced than I was. He was older than I was but our experiences up to that point were the same. So he ended up performing a heroic act of down climbing the second pitch of the Casual Route which includes that traverse, with a backpack because we couldn't figure out how else to get the backpack down. He couldn't just lower it from his position because it was 60 yards off to my left. So he down climbed that pitch to my position and then we rappelled off. And he was a little bit disappointed with me but also he showed a lot of love that day. It was a few weeks later that we decided to try it again and that was the night that we slept in the cabin with Billy Westbay and Doug Snively. Those were good omens; we made it up the next day.

Interviewer: That was your first experience big wall climbing which you later go on to do more of.

Bernard Gillette: Yeah, I don't know that I'd say that it was my first experience big wall climbing in that we regarded the North Face of Hallett as a big wall, the

Petit Grepon is a big wall, Spearhead is a big wall. We had done all of those in preparation for the Diamond. Yeah, the Diamond is still bigger. So I guess you could say, that was definitely my first success at the Diamond, yes. And yes, I went on to climb many many more big walls after that. Fantastic experience up there. It's my favorite climb in fact. Not just the Casual Route but the Diamond. I've done it 46 times now.

Interviewer: What's so special about the Diamond?

Bernard Gillette: As life has gone on and kids and work have crowded out the free time that I used to have to wholly devote to climbing, climbing opportunities have decreased which I think is very normal for us as we get older. My brother and I some years ago realized, "If we're going to have one day during the summer where both of us have off, we're both able to get away from our families, and we're going to climb together and we're going to do something memorable, it's going to be the Diamond. There's no other face out there that matches it within the confines of Estes Park. In fact within the confines of the United States, the Diamond is regarded as one of the best alpine objectives. It's a world famous wall. So to pick the Diamond as my favorite spot to be, it's just because it's such a special experience. It's unbroken vertical from bottom to top. As you finish off the wall, there's a lotta, lotta, air underneath your heels. There's a real sense of accomplishment. Some of the routes that I've done in the last five or ten years up on the Diamond, there just fun. Because I've been up there often enough now that the fear of going up there is reduced. I still get scared on Diamond days, cause it is a big undertaking, but we have also just had some fantastic days where we've started off on the North Chimney, roped up and simul-climbed the entire Casual Route. Got done in an hour and fifty-six minutes. So other people have free soloed it much faster than that, I think in under an hour it's gone. But to be able to climb at that level of proficiency, my brother and I just love that, we love blowing the doors off the other people that are out there, to tell you the truth. It's a lot of fun to just be at Broadway with everybody else and then we're at the top of the wall and they're still struggling up the second pitch. It's not because we're better climbers than them, it's just that we've been up there so often. We know the routine, we know the route well. I've done the Casual Route probably a dozen times. Yeah, the Diamond, you can't get that experience anywhere else as far as I'm concerned. That's been my big wall that I try to do every single summer. I'm trying to keep the number of assents that I have equal to or greater than my age. I'm actually going to fail at that this year because in January I turn 47 and my Diamond ascent number is at 46 right now, so this will be the second time in my life. Once I got the number of assents past my age, this will be the second time in my life where I've slipped back. There's good reason for it, I was in a huge calculus book project with my co-authors this last year and we had to write three 1,400 page books and I just couldn't find the time to climb the

Diamond this summer. But next summer I'm climbing it twice so I can get my Diamond assents back above my age.

15:50

Interviewer: That's a great goal. Speaking of your other world, do any kids on campus ever stop you and say, "Hey, you're Bernard Gillette! You are a climber."

Bernard Gillette: I don't think I have the facial recognition that a movie star might have. Certainly people know my name and when my students show up in class and they are climbers, they will ask me, "Oh you're Bernard Gillette." But it's not because of my face, it's just because of my name on the guidebook. Are you the guy that wrote the guidebook? So yes, I do get those questions from my students now and again. Most of my students don't climb, that's the reality. But I have been for the past, I'd say dozen years, I eat up some of my service hours that I'm supposed to do at the University by doing climbing trips for my students. Both of the programs that I work for encourage this. I work in these residential academic programs which are sort of dorm experiences for freshman and sophomores. One of the programs in particular, they do weekend trips as often as they can. So they'll do a trip to a fourteener and then they'll do a trip elk bugling up here in Estes Park. One of the trips we do every summer is Rock Climbing with Bernard. I have certainly had the gratification I guess you could say of students recognizing that I'm the guy who wrote the guidebook. But I've also had just the very fun experience of taking these young adults out and a lot of them have never climbed before. We get sort of half and half, we get the kids signing up for the trip that are into climbing or just getting into climbing and really want to go and the kids that see my enthusiasm for it and say, "I'm going to try this." We'll set up top ropes on 5.4s and 5.6s and then 5.10s and 5.11s for the kids that know what they're doing. So I've had a few of those kids on the climbing trips that I've taken at the University. They've become my sometimes climbing partners. I'm doing I guess what Douglas did for me so many years ago. I mentor these kids along and a couple of them have started to exceed my abilities, which is really neat to see. I need to call them up and help them drag me up, they can become my rope gun now. Again, that kind of is what happened with Douglas and me that he started out as my mentor and then as the years went and I got better and he got older and couldn't climb as well that I became the rope gun. There's a couple of guys out there that I met at the University campus that could take that role for me.

Interviewer: Thanks for sharing your stories with me today.

Bernard Gillette: You're welcome. Thanks for having me.

18:39 [End of Part D. End of Interview.]

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**ABSTRACT:** Bernard Gillette shares a captivating description of his lifelong development as an accomplished mountaineer and ultimately a recognized guide book author. Bernard is the third in a chain of four generations of his family who have climbed Longs Peak which started with his grandmother's climb in 1913. He also represents an important human link with previous generations of notable area climbers and is now passing on that long and rich heritage as he mentors younger climbers. One highlight of the interview is Bernard's sharing the emotions associated with climbing challenging and dangerous routes on Lumpy Ridge and other climbs in Rocky Mountain National Park.

**Note:** Added material appears in brackets.

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